

***Separation as a Risk Factor for  
Victims of Intimate Partner Violence:  
Beyond Lethality and Injury  
A Response to Campbell***

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***Between 25% and 41% of women report*** a lifetime history of physical or sexual assault by an intimate partner (Richardson et al., 2002; Tjaden & Thoennes, 2000; Wilt & Olson, 1996), and the health and mental health consequences of partner victimization are significant (Kilpatrick, Acierno, Resnick, Saunders, & Best, 1997; Resnick, Acierno, & Kilpatrick, 1997). One obvious solution to ending the violence is for a woman to leave or separate from the violent partner. In fact, many, if not most women in abusive relationships do eventually leave violent relationships (Amato & Rogers, 1997; Bradbury & Lawrence, 1999; Testa & Leonard, 2001). However, leaving a violent partner does not always stop the violence. In fact, separation has been identified as an important risk factor for lethal violence and injury (Campbell, 1995; J. Campbell et al., 2003; McFarlane et al., 1999). Although lethal violence and injury are extremely important risks and considerations, there are other often-overlooked risks that women must face when they separate from a violent partner that should be considered in research and interventions. More specifically, women separating in the context of victimization are at high risk for stress, mental health, and health problems; have increased conflict over the children and concern for child safety; and have economic, structural, psychological, and social barriers to help seeking. All of these factors may substantially affect a woman's separation adjustment, well-being, and ability to maintain separation from a violent ex-partner.

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1478

### **Increased Risk for Stress, Mental Health, and Health Problems**

Separation is a common life transition with approximately 50% of first marriages and about 60% of second marriages ending in divorce; and more than 60% of cohabitant relationships ending in separation within a 5-year period (Bumpass, Sweet, & Castro Martin, 1990; Cherlin, 1992; Krieder & Fields, 2002; Smock & Manning, 1997; Wu & Balakrishnan, 1995). Although separation is common, it is generally a stressful life event and is associated with increased stress levels and negative mental health and health problems for women (Logan, Walker, Jordan, & Campbell, 2004). More specifically, changes in finances, social networks, employment, residence, neighborhoods, childcare, and schools are common for families during the course of a separation. For example, separation usually diminishes the economic standing of women (Amato, 2000; Kreider & Fields, 2002; McKeever & Wolfinger, 2001) and decreases social support systems (Marks, 1996; O'Connor, Hawkins, Dunn, Thorpe, & Golding, 1998; C. Ross, 1995). In addition, separation is often associated with increased demands and complexity. For example, single parents, most of whom are mothers (86%) (Fields & Casper, 2001; Sorensen & Zibman, 2000), are more likely to experience stress and role strain (Amato, 2000; Hope, Rodgers, & Power, 1999; Johnson & Wu, 2002) because they are single-handedly trying to keep the family together economically, psychologically, and physically (e.g., appointments, school responsibilities, extracurricular activities) especially compared to married mothers (Kaiser Family Foundation, 2003; Ladd & Zvonkovic, 1995). Furthermore, conflict in separating and divorcing couples is common especially during property and child custody negotiations (Buchanan & Heiges, 2001). It is likely that these stressors are related to the increased risk of health and mental health problems often reported for separating women (Logan, Walker, Jordan, & Campbell, 2004).

In addition to the stressors, health, and mental health problems that are experienced during a typical separation, women leaving abusive relationships often experience mental health and health problems from the violence during the relationship (Logan, Walker, Cole, & Leukefeld, 2002; Logan, Walker, Jordan, & Leukefeld, 2004). Partner violence experiences have been associated with mental health problems such as anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and depression (Golding, 1999; Holtzworth-Munroe, Smultzler, & Sandin, 1997; Weaver & Clum, 1995). Research suggests that the mental health effects of partner victimization can last for years even after the violence has ended for some women depending on the level of cumulative stress over time (Anderson & Saunders, 2003; Anderson, Saunders,

Yoshihama, Bybee, & Sullivan, 2003). Women with histories of partner violence also report health problems such as acute injuries, chronic health problems, and stress-related health problems (J. Campbell, Woods, Chouaf, & Parker, 2000; Dutton, Haywood, & El-Bayoumi, 1997; Eby, Campbell, Sullivan, & Davidson, 1995; Resnick et al., 1997).

Furthermore, ongoing violence can exacerbate health, mental health, and stress levels. One study found that 95% of women leaving violent relationships continued to experience psychological abuse and 39% experienced continued physical violence after separating (Hotton, 2001). Several longitudinal studies suggest that women who experience frequent and ongoing violence have higher rates of psychological distress than women not experiencing ongoing violence (R. Campbell, Sullivan, & Davidson, 1995; Mechanic, Uhlmansiek, Weaver, & Resick, 2002; Mertin & Mohr, 2001).

#### **Increased Conflict About the Children and Concern for Child Safety**

Although conflict and threats of custody disputes may occur in separating couples regardless of violence history, a history of violence changes the context of the custody disputes and the separation experience (Logan, Walker, Jordan, & Campbell, 2004). There is some evidence suggesting that violent ex-partners sometimes use the court system by disputing custody to continue to try to control, intimidate, and harass their partners (J. Campbell, Rose, Kub, & Nedd, 1998; Jaffe, Lemon, & Poisson, 2003). One study found that almost 40% of women leaving partners who were abusive were afraid during custody and child support negotiations (Kurz, 1996). In addition, women leaving partners who were abusive often experience threats to harm or abduct the children (McCloskey, 2001; Mechanic, Weaver, & Resick, 2000), and these threats are especially salient given the research suggesting the overlap between partner violence and child abuse (30% to 60% of cases) (McCloskey, Figueredo, & Koss, 1995; S. Ross, 1996). Thus, not only are women concerned for their own safety, they are also often concerned for their children's safety. Even so, there is some evidence suggesting the criminal justice system does not consider mother's or the child's safety in making custody and visitation determinations (Logan, Walker, Horvath, & Leukefeld, 2003; Logan, Walker, Jordan, & Horvath, 2002), and certain custody and visitation arrangements may actually provide opportunities for a violent ex-partner to continue to harass his ex-partner (Henderson, 1990; Hilton, 1992; Wuest, Ford-Gilboe, Merritt-Gray, & Berman, 2003). Furthermore, the legal system does not always protect women from partner violence that may increase stress levels even further during this transition period (Logan,

Evans, Stevenson, & Jordan, in press; Logan, Shannon, & Walker, in press; Logan, Stevenson, Evans, & Leukefeld, 2004).

### **Economic, Structural, Psychological, and Social Barriers**

Economic strain is a significant issue for women and mothers who are separating in general; however, poverty has particularly been associated with victimization experiences of all types including intimate partner violence victimization (U.S. Department of Justice, 1997, 2000). In addition, women with partner abuse histories often have employment problems because of the violence that may affect their economic stability, independence, and status even after separating (Swanberg & Logan, in press). Women with partner violence histories often experience numerous barriers to accessing health and mental health care as well as more obvious resources such as housing and legal resources (Logan, Evans, Stevenson, & Jordan, in press; Logan et al., in press; Logan, Stevenson et al., 2004). Furthermore, there are many psychological barriers and difficulties women must contend with including psychological adjustment to the separation and the loss of the relationship as well as coming to terms with the victimization experiences (Anderson & Saunders, 2003; Logan, Walker, Jordan, & Campbell, 2004). In addition, almost every woman who has experienced physical and sexual abuse has also experienced psychological abuse (Follingstad, Rutledge, Berg, Hause, & Polek, 1990). However, psychological abuse is extremely harmful and creates substantial barriers for women regarding their self-worth and self-efficacy (Arias & Pape, 1999; Marshall, 1999; Sackett & Saunders, 1999). Research also shows that cognitive difficulties can occur as a result of chronic stress, threats, fear, and mental health problems that can impair decision making, cognitive appraisals of threats and responses to threats, and the ability to maintain separation (Logan, Walker, Jordan, & Campbell, 2004). Finally, women with victimization histories may be socially isolated because of the violence or because of embarrassment and stigma that may be a significant barrier in help seeking and adjustment (Logan, Walker, Jordan, & Campbell, 2004).

*Gaps in the literature.* Understanding there are risks for women separating from partners who are violent beyond lethality and injury is an important step in furthering research and interventions for intimate partner violence victims. However, there are several gaps in the literature that need to be addressed with research to facilitate interventions. First, the literature on separation for women has been developed in isolation from the victimization lit-

erature; while at the same time, the victimization literature has paid little attention to the separation literature. Often, separation is seen as so-called the answer to ending the violence and/or as a normal transition. However, interventions cannot be developed without a more clear understanding of this important and risky transition time for women separating in the context of victimization. Second, more information is needed to understand the contextual differences within which separation experiences occur. For example, examining separation in the context of victimization and how cultural norms may influence the separation process is important. In addition, understanding differences among women separating from cohabitant partners who are violent and violent marital partners may be important in understanding the separation process. Moreover, understanding how community resources may hinder or facilitate separation in the context of victimization and individual outcomes is critical. Finally, theoretical models are greatly needed to guide future research as well as interventions. However, it is critical that these models include contextual and individual factors as well as allow for a range of individual responses to both separation and victimization experiences (Logan & Walker, 2004).

### CONCLUSION

Although separation is a commonly experienced life transition, it is generally a stressful life event and is associated with negative mental health and health problems for women regardless of victimization history. The research clearly suggests that separation is a risk factor for lethal violence and injury; however, separation for women leaving partners who are violent poses many risks beyond lethality and injury that should be considered in research and interventions. The full spectrum of risks cannot be addressed without expanding the knowledge base regarding separation in the context of victimization. Understanding the dimensions and critical issues women face when separating from an ex-partner who is violent could make a substantial difference in their individual adjustment and potentially to societal cost over time.

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